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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a series of in-service workshops on the teaching of writing, conducted for elementary and secondary teachers. After a brief overview of the way in which the workshops were planned, the paper examines the topics dealt with in the workshops: the composing process, varieties of writing, skills of writing, mechanics and conventions of writing, sentence combining, workshopping (interaction among students for the purpose of discussing and evaluating each other's writing), assessment and evaluation, the development of sample writing assignments, and developing writing competencies for kindergarten through the twelfth grade. The paper concludes with an examination of major learnings that emerged from the in-service workshops. A sample evaluation scale, a detailed description of the evaluation methods that were taught, and sample third-grade and seventh-grade writing assignments are included. (GW)

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COMPOSING AS THE CURRICULUM: THE ALBION WRITING PROJECT

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Introduction.

In the fall of 1976, we started an inservice program for "Improving Basic Writing Skills, K-12" in the Albion, New York, Public Schools. The Superintendent, Douglas Houck, who set the program in motion, was initially concerned because a large number of ninth grade students had failed the trial New York State Basic Competency Test in Writing Skills. Beyond such a concern, though, he wished to have the teachers in his district, kindergarten through grade twelve, address themselves in a cooperative fashion to the solution of a major curriculum situation, in this case, the problem of improving the writing of students and the teaching of writing in the entire school district.

The plan was for the two of us -- as consultants in English education -- to conduct a series of workshops with selected elementary school teachers from grades K-6 and with all English teachers, grades 7-12, for the improvement of writing.

We intend this article to be an informal description of how we set up and conducted the series of inservice workshops and what all of us -- public school teachers and administrators and college professors -- learned as a result of the program. With a knowledge of what worked, what bombed, and what we would do differently, you may be able to profit from our successes and failures and set up your own program.

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What We Planned.

We first met with administrators of the school district -- to find out what their needs were and to gain their crucial support -- and arrived at this general outline of activities.

General Inservice Activities

1. Conduct inservice workshops for the teachers of English language arts, K-12, including these activities:
   a. make available latest research, information, textbooks, and special materials on teaching writing.
   b. assist teachers in creating exemplary lessons to be used in classes.
   c. assist teachers with discussion and planning skills.
   d. outline with teachers a program for assessing writing by students and for assessing the total writing program of the school district.

2. Develop a tentative writing program, grades K-12.

We intended from the first that the program would be an exploratory one, one in which teachers, school students, and college consultants would by necessity work cooperatively on setting up a program for improving the teaching of writing skills, K-12. As far as we could tell, there was no such program being carried out nor planned throughout the country. We did know that we would be learning along with the teachers and their students some tentative, if not hard and fast, answers to some crucial questions about improving writing and teaching writing. We were sure about one thing, though, that an intimate understanding of the composing process should serve as the basis of the program, that, in fact, "composing" was the writing curriculum. And we felt confident, furthermore, that we had in hand the most recent research and the articles, books, and curricula dealing with teaching writing successfully. But we felt certain the real problem in developing such a program would be in persuading a group of teachers to develop and implement what at times would appear to be radically new practices in their classrooms. Essentially, though, we were cautiously optimistic that if we presented what we considered reasonable

in teaching writing that teachers of good faith would accept those ideas and put into practice activities they thought useful.

From a couple of planning meetings -- with the teachers and us working together -- we arrived at this general plan for the year's activities in the inservice sessions and the school classrooms. Two-hour workshop meetings were to be held from October, 1976 through May, 1977, alternating one week with selected elementary school teachers, K-6, and another week with all secondary school English teachers, 7-12.

Outline of In-Service Topics and Classroom Activities

In-Service Topics	Classroom Activities
1. Composing Process--prewriting, writing, rewriting.	1. Teach composing process in the classroom: prewriting, writing, rewriting.
2. Varieties of Writing -- exposition, persuasion, narration, description.	2. Teach varieties of writing from the universe of discourse, following Aristotle's categories (most familiar to teachers and students).
3. Skills of Writing--use of adjectives and adverbs, active and passive verbs, wordiness, use of concrete and abstract words, transitions, focus, etc.	3. Teach skills of writing as separate activities or during composing process (after first draft).
4. Teaching Conventions and Mechanics of Writing.	4. Teach conventions and mechanics of writing (spelling, punctuation, capitalization, standard usage) as separate activities or during composing process (after first draft).
5. Sentence Combining -- syntactic fluency and sentence variety.	5. Teach variety of sentence combinings through free and signalled sentence combining exercises.
6. Workshopping -- during prewriting (primary traits) and after successive drafts; teaching teachers and students how to "talk about" (assess) different kinds of writing.	6. Identify characteristics of each variety of writing during prewriting; help students understand concepts of audience, message, and persona and how they relate to distinct types of discourse.
7. Assessment and Evaluation -- by a. primary traits b. holistic assessment and by c. mechanics.	7. Provide teachers with a variety of ways for assessing student writing and for giving grades. Teach students how to assess their own writing.

In-Service Topics	Classroom Activities
8. Develop Sample Writing Assignments--based upon the composing process with format of prewriting, writing, and rewriting.	8. Try out writing assignments in classes and keep sample compositions with student and teacher reactions.
9. Develop Competencies in Writing, K-12 -- types of writing for various ages, levels, abilities.	9. Try out types of writing in classes and subjectively assess the effectiveness of the activities.

What We Did .

1. The Composing Process. The idea of the "composing process as curriculum" was ever present in the workshops. We asked the teachers to create pieces of discourse during the workshop sessions. And they, in turn, took their students, from kindergarten through grade twelve through the various stages of the composing process, producing various kinds of writing.

This is the outline for the composing in writing we eventually developed. In the left hand column are the stages of composing; the right hand column shows where the skills of writing could and sometimes were integrated with the composing stages.

Stages in Composing	Integration of Writing Skills
Prewriting -- any activity to provide raw material for writing: questioning, free writing, making entries in journals, guided recollection, or responding to visuals. Interactive; that is, occurs with others.	
Writing -- first draft of piece without concern for "correctness" at this point; writing out to find out what you want to say. Individual; that is, done alone.	
	Skills of Writing -- such as use of concrete over abstract words taught here. Interactive.
	Sentence Combining -- taught with prepared exercises or with sentences from students' first draft compositions. Interactive.
Revising -- extensive revisions to the piece, such as moving sections around or changing point of view. Interactive.	

Stages in Composing	Integration of Writing Skills
Editing--correcting errors in spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and standard usage; producing "good, clean copy." Interactive.	Mechanics and Conventions of Writing--teaching the correction of errors from exercises or with examples from student compositions. Interactive.
Publishing--preparing polished pieces for the enjoyment of others by mounting on construction paper, publishing in school magazine or newspaper or dittoing copies for students in classroom. Interactive.	

2. Varieties of Writing. We considered various outlines of types of discourse, such as Britton's, Kinneavy's, and Moffett's (see Bibliography), but eventually settled on Aristotle's four categories of discourse: persuasion, exposition, description, and variation. We knew that Aristotle first applied these categories to forms of speeches made by classical orators, but we decided to use them for two reasons. First, we could gather almost all types of writing done in the schools under one of the four categories, and second, they were categories the majority of us knew well and felt comfortable with.

3. Skills of Writing. For the most part, skills of writing were treated during one or more stages of the composing process with the emphasis on a particular skill, which was related to a distinct piece of discourse, such as the use of logic in a persuasive piece. Some teachers, on the other hand, wished to use exercises dealing with certain skills. The issue was not resolved satisfactorily.

4. Mechanics and Conventions of Writing. Again, the most attention to spelling, punctuation, usage, and format was paid during the composing process, especially after the revision stage. And again, some teachers wanted separate drill on mechanics. We did not settle the question of integrating skills instruction with writing, possibly because we wanted to spend more time with actual composing or maybe because we just wished to delay confrontation over this issue until the teachers were comfortable with the composing process.

5. Sentence Combining. We presented to the teachers the background of research in sentence combining by Kellogg Hunt, John Mellon, and Frank O'Hare and the article on an outline for sentence combining activities by Charles Cooper. We had the teachers work through exercises prepared by one of us and let them examine the texts on sentence combining, Sentencecraft by Frank O'Hare and Sentence Combining by William Strong. The teachers gave some of the exercises to their students and reported they had no trouble with them, but the teachers also stated they would like a series of sentence combining problems, making up a sequential program for their students.

6. Workshopping. The interactive aspect of the composing process -- We repeat this again so as to emphasize the point -- was at the heart of the writing program. Most teachers had not been trained to let students talk to each other in the classroom, before and after they had written a composition, and they raised these questions about the process. How can students help each other write better? Won't they discuss everything but the writing? What will the administrators say when they hear such a noisy classroom? How can I allow students to talk together when I have thirty-seven kids?

And these were legitimate concerns, too. For "workshopping," the idea that when people work together, criticizing and offering feedback for each other's ideas, they produce better pieces of writing than when they work completely alone, the idea that "composing is the curriculum," is a revolutionary one for most teachers.

But when these teachers of good faith tried workshopping in their classrooms, tentatively and even timidly at first, when they began to trust their intuitive feelings about how they knew writing should proceed and when they began to have faith that their kids would want to write about matters close to them and discuss

their compositions with each other, if they were allowed to, amazing things happened.

Students began to point out problems in their writing and in the writing of other kids, many times as well as could the teacher. Sure, the students discussed matters other than those directly related to the specific piece at hand, but in almost all cases, the topics were at least indirectly related to the problems of good writing. Yes, the classrooms were noisy, but the noise for a change, was that of kids excitedly discussing school matters, and the administrators, once they knew what was going on, endorsed the activity.

7. Assessment and Evaluation. Assessing compositions and giving grades for them are always ticklish topics for English teachers. We emphasized the difference between assessing -- identifying the elements of a good composition for purposes of improving instruction -- and evaluating -- giving a grade to a finished product. Essentially we arrived at this tentative procedure for assessing and evaluating student writing. Teachers, working cooperatively with students, when possible, would develop the features (primary traits, as developed by R. Lloyd-Jones for the National Assessment of Educational Progress in writing) of a particular kind of writing, such as autobiography. The students would know what the characteristics of a successful autobiography were before the started writing, would have student and professional samples available, and would assess each other's and their own autobiographies, according to such a scale as this one.

COMPOSITION # _____ Evaluator: _____

EVALUATION SCALE: AUTOBIOGRAPHY

	LOW				HIGH	
TONE: mixture of humor and seriousness	1	2	3	4	5	_____
PERSONAL VOICE: has many "I's" and "me's"; personal touch; first person point of view.	1	2	3	4	5	_____
DETAILS: sufficient details.	1	2	3	4	5	_____
REAL EXPERIENCES: happenings seem to have really occurred.	1	2	3	4	5	_____

COMPOSITION # _____ Evaluator: _____

EVALUATION SCALE: AUTOBIOGRAPHY

	LOW				HIGH	
ORGANIZATION: structure clear; either chronological or use of flashbacks.	1	2	3	4	5	_____
OPENING: grabs your interest right away.	1	2	3	4	5	_____
ENDING: makes you want to know what happens next.	1	2	3	4	5	_____
MECHANICS (spelling, punctuation, capitalization, correct usage): not crucial but important.	1	2	3	4	5	_____
				TOTAL		_____

COMMENTS:

We found these to be the advantages of such a system of assessment. The students knew what the features were of a good piece of writing before they started writing. The students could help each other identify problem areas in their compositions, using such a scale. And the teachers could help the students improve their compositions without worrying about the mixed effects that grades on each draft of a composition would have.

We suggested that the grading of compositions be handled like this. Each student had his writing in a folder kept in the classroom. Toward the end of a working period--when some sort of a grade was required--the teacher would look at each individual folder and consider these three factors as the basis for a grade. First, the teacher would simply note effort.- Had the student at least tried all the writing activities? Second, the teacher would assess the student's writing improvement over the marking period. And third, the teacher would ask each student to pick out his two or three best finished pieces and discuss his improvement in writing with the teacher. On the basis of these three types of evidence, the teacher assigned a grade. Although it was a lengthy process, the procedure had obvious advantages. The student was evaluated on his best, polished work. The grade was used to designate improvement. The student had a clear idea of what the basis was

of his grade. And the teacher didn't need to read all papers written by the students and agonize over grades for them; he read only the final, finished pieces. Most grades for the writing were therefore higher than they would have been otherwise, and the students usually didn't argue about their marks because they had a clear understanding of how they were arrived at.

As well as showing the teachers how to assess and evaluate the individual compositions of their students, we took the teachers through the process of assessing the papers produced by the students in selected classrooms at grades three, seven, and ten. Although the program was not set up to produce results for an empirical study, we analyzed pre- and post-treatment compositions created by students in the three grades.

First, we measured growth in the average length of t-units, an acknowledged measure of syntactic maturity. Normally, researchers measure growth in t-units after a regular, sequential program in sentence combining. Although we had no such program at Albion, we assessed the number of t-units in pre- and post-treatment compositions to show the teachers how the t-unit was measured. We would have been ecstatic if the t-units in the compositions had increased over the inservice period, but we were not surprised to find the number of t-units had declined in compositions for all three grades, even though the decline was not significant.

Second, we measured growth in fluency, simply a count of the number of words in the compositions. The results show that fluency declined for the third graders but increased for both the seventh and tenth grades, with the overall fluency for all compositions in the three grades increasing over the inservice period.

Third, we assessed the quality of compositions, according to a primary trait rating scale used by the teachers after a special training session. The results showed that the quality of the third and seventh grade compositions increased slightly while the quality of the tenth grade compositions declined. The quality of the total number of compositions, however, improved slightly, although the improvement was not significant.

One important factor in the decline of t-units and the slight gain in the quality of compositions, we were convinced, was the testing procedure. For the pre-treatment compositions, we gave the students as a stimulus a picture of soldiers marching in a line and asked them to write a story about the picture (as an example of narration). For the post-treatment compositions, the teachers gave the same stimulus and assignment. The teachers said many students were unhappy with the assignment. They didn't like writing from the same picture twice. And they definitely did not like writing in a testing situation with time for only minimum revisions of a first draft, when they had been taught to take time -- two or three class periods -- to produce a third - or fourth - draft composition.

8. Develop Sample Writing Assignments. After a few workshop sessions, some teachers began to create assignments for their students, following the format of the composing process -- with skills instruction integrated within the composing stages -- of prewriting, writing, and rewriting.

Here are sample third grade and seventh grade writing assignments:

Writing Activity/Description
Grade 3
Linda Spierdowis

Prewriting.

1. Pupils read silently and orally story about an imaginary bird.
2. Pupils discuss the bird with each other and with the teacher.
3. Pupils dramatize the story of the bird.
4. With lights turned off, pupils close their eyes to "see" their own imaginary birds.
   Pupils describe orally their birds.
5. Pupils draw a picture of their imaginary bird.

Writing.

1. Teacher writes on board, "I saw a bird...." and asks pupils to finish the sentence on scrap paper.

Workshop Activity

Each pupil reads his sentence to another pupil.

Skills Instruction

Teacher uses flash cards to show pupils interesting descriptive words.

Rewriting.

1. Pupils rewrite their sentences, concentrating on correct spelling and on interesting sentences.
2. Each pupil reads aloud his sentence to another pupil and then to the entire group.
3. The teacher reads the sentences and makes oral suggestions about improving the sentences to each pupil.
4. Pupils rewrite their sentences and copy them onto the pictures they had drawn.

Writing Activity/Description
Grade 7
Mark Williams

Prewriting.

1. Discuss basic definition of description and techniques involved in writing one.
2. Use sample descriptions by Richard Wright.
3. Introduce pictured task cards for writing.

Writing.

1. Student lists details from pictured task card.
2. Student changes details to images.
3. Student refines image list.
4. Student practices spontaneous rough drafts in class (subjects supplied by teacher).
5. Student writes rough draft in paragraph form.

Skills Instruction

1. Discussion of guidelines for organization.
2. Review of passive vs. active verbs.
3. Discussion of use of dictionary and thesaurus.
4. Sentence combining activities.
5. Definition of image.

Workshop Activities

1. Each student discusses his writing with another student he feels comfortable with.
2. Discussion of trust relative to sharing.
3. Each student discusses his writing with another student he feels uncomfortable with.
4. Students read compositions in class and present the best in the group to the class with defense.
5. Students engage in "back pounding" (relaxing - trust exercise).

Rewriting.

1. Each student revises his own composition.
2. Each student meets with the teacher to discuss mechanical problems and final revisions.
3. Each student prepares his final draft.
4. Each student submits his final draft to the teacher.
5. Teacher reads and reacts in writing to the final draft.

9. Develop Competencies in Writing, K-12. We made only a start at this ambitious task. What we did was make an outline for each of the grade levels and asked the teachers to fill in the types of writing they presently required of their students under the categories of persuasion, exposition, narration, and description. The next step, we decided, was to refine the outline so it was logical and sequential and to identify performances appropriate for each grade level.

What We Learned.

As we have pointed out in the preceding section, we learned a lot about specific aspects of a program designed to improve writing in an entire school system. But we also learned some rather important general things about writing, teaching writing, working cooperatively on teaching and learning matters, and basically with what happened when we assumed that "composing was the curriculum." We learned, essentially, that many of the concepts critical to the program take all of us--teachers, students, administrators, and college professors--a long time to internalize. We had to live with these ideas, put them into practice, and assess them before we could accept them fully and base our actions upon them. Here are some of those "difficult" but important ideas.

The idea of the "composing process." Teachers and students found it hard to accept the fact that writing takes time and that it involves at least three stages: prewriting, writing, and rewriting. As the teachers began to spend a good deal of time with the process in the classroom, they found they needed to revise their notion of "covering" a large body of "content." Instead of assigning the traditional "theme a week," plus having students analyze pieces of literature, teachers found they needed to adapt to the idea that it might take two weeks of class work for students to produce polished compositions. And students found it difficult to realize that

revising meant not just "copying it over in ink."

The idea of students "sharing" with each other drafts of compositions. Before the workshops most teachers and students held the belief that writing was a solitary pursuit, with the student writing a composition to be "judged" ultimately by a teacher. Both students and teachers found it difficult to accept the notion that students and teachers could actually help each other in improving drafts of compositions.

The idea of "assessing writing" without numerical or letter grades. At first both students and teachers felt the need for a grade on each paper they wrote. Eventually, however, teachers reported that students would rewrite and polish papers without regard for grades. Once students became used to the idea that teachers were reacting to their papers rather than grading them, they began to write for reasons other than for a specific grade.

The idea that one could "talk about" the essentials of a piece of writing without even mentioning mechanics--like spelling, punctuation, and standard usage. Both students and teachers were at first frustrated with trying to describe a piece of writing except in terms of mechanics, but after instruction in and discussion of the elements of particular varieties of writing, like "narration" or "persuasion," both students and teachers found they could analyze and assess the elements of various types of writing accurately and confidently.

The idea that there may be at least two very different "modes of mental activities" going on while one writes--one we might label as intellectual and conscious and the other emotional and unconscious. Both students and teachers needed to be encouraged to trust their unconscious as they let ideas pour out in an initial draft. Then, they learned, they could use their conscious intellect to revise and rework the result of their emotional first draft.

The idea that "cooperation" by a group of interested professionals to solve a complex, pedagogical problem--like teaching written composition in an entire school system--is more productive than the work done by individuals trying to solve such problems by themselves. We worked hard at creating a spirit of encouragement, cooperation, and sharing of ideas. As the workshops went on, and the teachers became more confident, they began to contribute substantially to the proceedings and produced many writing activities and a fine rough draft of an outline for a district wide, K-12, scope and sequence program for improving basic writing skills.

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